An Excerpt from "High-Stakes and Low Stakes Writing" by Peter Elbow and Mary Deane Sorcinelli.

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PREVENTING AND HANDLING PLAGIARISM

We can't catch all plagiarism – and if we try, we'll turn ourselves from teachers into suspicious cops. It's hard to track down the sources in Internet cheating. "Using Internet search engines, DVD-based reference works, online journals, Web-based news sources, article databases, and other electronic courses, students can find information about nearly any topic and paste the data directly into their papers. Or students can take credit for documents they find or buy online, or that they get as email attachments from friends living down the hall or a thousand miles away" (Sterngold, 2004, p. 16).

The issue of plagiarism gets more complicated as a growing number of students from other countries and cultures "enter the [current U.S.] college classroom believing that truth, wisdom, and cultural artifacts such as art and literature are cultural community property, the result of years of accumulated wisdom transmitted by venerated leaders and by oral traditions, many of them religious" (Swearingen, 1999; see also McCleod, 1992). Thus it's far easier to *prevent* plagiarism than to handle it after the fact. See the chapter What to Do About Cheating for a fuller treatment of cheating. Here we treat only plagiarism in writing.

Despite our best efforts to prevent plagiarism, it can happen. But when we get work that looks plagiarized, we must withhold judgment in the absence of trustworthy evidence. In particular, it's no fair saying, "This work is better than you can do," for in fact most students are capable of work that's astonishingly better than what they usually turn in.

Some teachers who suspect plagiarism meet with the student right away and present their account of the situation. They try to bring samples of the student's earlier writing. If the student cited sources, they ask that he or she bring the source materials to the meeting. If the student pleads guilty, you may conclude, nevertheless, that it was not intentional plagiarism. In such a case, you can resolve the matter informally – for example, by allowing the student to rewrite the assignment rather than lowering the grade for the assignment or course.

Other teachers try first to establish definitive proof, for example, by using google.com or new software that can detect plagiarism such as turnitin.com.

Many campuses have a policy on academic dishonesty that forbids imposing any penalty at all without reporting the case to the official committee and allowing the student to appeal. This may seem bureaucratic at first glance, but there are two good justifications. Many students have been falsely accused and penalized; and not a few students have been found working out informal arrangements with teachers over and over again – convincing each teacher that they've never been involved in anything like this before. It's important to check out the procedures at your institution.

WAYS TO PREVENT PLAGIARISM

- Clarify in your syllabus what constitutes plagiarism in your course. Tell students what documentation is required for essays, including use of the Internet. Tell students what is acceptable and unacceptable collaboration with other students.

- Encourage students to come to you or e-mail you if they are in doubt about citations. Try to persuade them that admitting that they don't know something is much better than making a mistake that could constitute plagiarism.

- Ask students to check their syllabi in advance to see if there are some weeks in which they have too many writing assignments due at once. Allow students to hand in an assignment early so as to balance their workload.

- Collect lots of low-stakes informal writing so students know that you know their style and voice.

- On high-stakes essays, where students might be more tempted to cheat, assign specific, idiosyncratic topics so they can't lift things from books, the Internet, or other courses. Examples: "Apply this theory to that set of data"; "Describe your reactions to X and then go on to…"; "Give a sympathetic summary and then a critical summary of what X writes on page 134, and then write an essay of your own reflections about it"; "Write a short story that illustrates the principles we've studied this week."

- Requires drafts and revisions and cover letters that explain the revisions. Require students to hand in all previous versions and notes with every final draft.

- Write fresh topics each year so students aren't tempted to recycle papers from previous years.

- In large courses with different section leaders, have each leader make up different assignments for think pieces and essays – so students aren't tempted to copy work between sections. Circulate copies of new (and old) topics to all instructors.

- Students are less tempted to plagiarize from the Internet if you project that you are savvy and familiar with what is out there. One of our colleagues deters problems with this note in his syllabus: "Last year, we suspended paper-writing in favor of hour tests while we studied Internet plagiarism and how to detect it. Now we're ready."

S.H. McCleod, "Responding to Plagiarism: The Role of the WPA," *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 1992, *15*(3), 7-16.

A. Sterngold, "Confronting Plagiarism: How Convential Teaching Invites Cyber-Cheating," *Change*, May/June 2004, *36*(3), 16-21.

C.J. Swearingen, "Originality, Authenticity, Imitation, and Plagiarism: Augustine's Chinese Cousins," in Lisa Buranen and Alice M. Roy (eds.), *Perspectives on Plagiarism and Intellectual Property in a Postmodern World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 5-18.